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THE FUNCTION OF A CRITICAL THEOLOGY

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It is evident that the considerations to which we have given our attention in the preceding articles involve certain revisions of the conception of the function of theology which has hitherto generally prevailed. Theology remains, indeed, indispensable to religion. We cannot expect our religious life to be strong and sane unless it is guided by ideas which are capable of effectively and consistently organizing the impulses and the activities of religion. It is the business of theology to supply this intellectual guidance for the religious life. That task remains as imperative for one who believes in the processes of biblical criticism as it is for one who disbelieves in critical scholarship. But the conception of the nature of this guidance is altered if one accept the legitimacy of critical principles.

In the theologies which appeared before the rise of critical scholarship, it was assumed that the theologian had merely to set forth in systematic form the authorized truths of revelation. The validity of these truths was established by showing that the doctrines under consideration were contained in Scripture. Indeed, the theologian might conceivably feel in his inmost heart a sense of revolt against some doctrine which he nevertheless felt obliged to promulgate because of its scriptural character. Have there not been instances where the merciful heart of the preacher suffered agonies because he felt that he must proclaim some stern doctrine of predestination when all the time he felt that the non-elect were not being fairly treated? The writer remembers one dramatic occasion in a classroom during his seminary course, when an instructor distinguished for his beautiful, Christlike character gave passionate utterance to something like the following: "My whole soul revolts against the doctrine, and if it were not for the fact that I feel compelled by the divine oracles to proclaim it I

should not dare to suggest what God's Word declares to be true, viz., that every babe comes into this world under condemnation because of its hopeless sinfulness!" Such was the heroism demanded by the older conception of theology.

As has been repeatedly noted in the course of the preceding discussions, critical scholarship brings to light certain facts which make imperative a revision of the conception of the Bible which underlay the older theology. We find that the utterances of the Bible were correlated to the religious life of the age in which they made their appearance, and that this historical limitation makes it impossible to regard biblical utterances as timeless and absolute truths. As a matter of fact, so far as scientific beliefs are concerned, we have largely abandoned the attempt to force our thinking into the forms of biblical thought. We cease to put into our theologies today the cosmology which dominated the thoughts of biblical men. Thus we are actually using in the construction of our beliefs in this particular realm a different test from that employed by the older theologians. And since it proves to be impossible to portion out the biblical material into water-tight compartments, we are discovering that it is necessary in the realm of specifically religious ideas to depart from the simple test of conformity which was the ruling principle of the older theology. Modern treatises on Christian doctrine are abandoning the proof-text method, and are embodying in the discussion of doctrine methods of reasoning which imply a test of truth different from the appeal to authority.

It is a well-known fact that this departure from a simple "biblical" test of doctrine is arousing serious misgivings on the part of many deeply earnest men. Accustomed, as they are, to the belief that we may rely on the truthfulness of a divine communication to men, they feel that the substitution of a different test from that of scripturalness involves a departure from the basis of divine certainty, and the entrance upon a pathway of human guesswork, the end of which no one can see. To put it sharply, the test of truth employed by the older theology was the appeal to God's will and God's revealed truth. The test employed by critical scholarship is located in human judgment, which is

admittedly fallible. A "new theology" therefore seems at first inevitably to be on a less stable basis than is the traditional theology.

It would be easy in reply to this objection to repeat the familiar criticism so often passed on the appeal to authority, showing that even when one appeals to the "Word of God," the appeal is really to what one *believes* to be the Word of God, and hence is in the last analysis just as subjective as is the appeal to what one *believes* to be true. A more important task, however, is to show just what is involved if one frankly admits the obvious psychological fact that there is no way of getting back of one's belief save by a critical examination of the validity of the belief itself; for only through this human process of critical comparison do we have any mental content of a definite sort in our consciousness. Is there any religious value in the guidance furnished by a theology which makes no pretense to infallibility, and which insists upon no essentially different test from that employed in other realms of inquiry? If so, in what does that value consist? What sort of guidance have we a right to expect from a theology based on critical scholarship?

If theology adopt the same methods and the same tests as are applied in other realms of human investigation, it is evident that the guidance supplied by theology will be analogous to the guidance which we find furnished by scholarship in these other realms. A word or two about the function of scientific formulae in non-theological fields will help to an understanding of our problem.

A scientist of international reputation has been quoted as saying that he would just as soon think of calling a chemical formula "blue" as to call it "true." This somewhat startling announcement, which seems at first like an attitude of hopeless agnosticism, is really a challenge to that realistic conception of the function of theories which underlay both the older theology and the older philosophy. The business of science used to be conceived as that of an exact portrayal of things as they are in and of themselves. Men could thus describe the findings of the scientists as "laws of nature"; and these "laws" were frequently pictured as if they had an objective power to compel facts and events. A scientist once told me with amusement of the textbook on physics which he

studied as a boy, in which he learned that gases in their expansion "obeyed" a certain law, except one refractory gas which "violated" the law. From this point of view the law is the absolute constant, and the gases are the variables. This same scientist said that today if this refractory gas were discovered not to conform to the law, the conclusion would be not that the gas was "disobedient," but that the law itself needed revision. The facts which we encounter in our experience are first; theoretical formulations are secondary. Indeed, the expression "law of nature" is being abandoned just because it suggests an objective absoluteness which the modern scientist does not intend to affirm in his doctrines. A preferable phrase is "working hypothesis." This phrase on its surface reveals the fact that a theory is always relative to the facts to be explained by it, and is to be revised whenever these same facts may be better interpreted by some new hypothesis.

Thus our ideas and our doctrines are tools which we use in our encounter with reality. In order to act consistently, in order to arrive at any goal, we are compelled to picture the successive steps which experience must take in order to arrive. We must so far as possible bring into the imagination the obstacles and difficulties to be overcome, and the resources which we may call to our aid. This complex picture of difficulties and of helpful resources is put into the form of a theory or doctrine, on the basis of which we try our experiments. In the realm of science, no one pretends that atomic or molecular theories are photographic descriptions of the ultimate constitution of matter. They are simply ways of picturing the exigencies of experimentation in relation to what we call the material world. These theories have as a matter of fact enabled experimenters to make advances in their knowledge of the ways in which physical forces may be controlled and used for the benefit of humanity. The scientist is not concerned with the problem of the metaphysical adequacy of his formulae so much as with their proved capacity to serve him in his encounters with the problems of experience.

Indeed, as we all know, when it comes to the metaphysical problem of defining the ultimate constitution of reality, philosophers have never been able to agree. Are the idealists right,

when they declare that this seemingly solid earth is actually mere immaterial activity? Or must we affirm some sort of tangible substance as our ultimate? When one observes the age-long controversies and refinements of theory on this very question of "ultimate" reality, and notices that our practical understanding, of the ways in which we may successfully cope with reality has been actually promoted by scientists with less far-reaching formulations of the problem, one discovers that so far as the guidance of life is concerned, the "working hypotheses" of scientists who put "blueness" and "truth" in the same class may be quite as valuable as are the more ambitious interpretations of metaphysicians. We have theories concerning electricity which unlock for us precious resources of power, even though no one can tell exactly what electricity *is*. We conduct transportation through the seas on the basis of theories concerning gravitation and motion, even though men may confess ignorance as to the ultimate character of gravitation, and may admit that the construction of the steamship's machinery is still in the trial-and-error stage. Efficient guidance of life is therefore not dependent on absolute metaphysical certainty in the realm of theory.

We have come to recognize this same distinction between practical efficiency and metaphysical truth in some of the religious theories contained in the Bible. For example, few scholars now feel it worth while to try to prove that the conception of the universe contained in the Bible is "true" in the absolute sense. Yet we recognize that reverence and loyalty to God were actually developed by the theology which embodied itself, for example, in the naïve conceptions of the cosmos displayed in the second chapter of Genesis. Indeed, even with our scientific sophistication, we can still find religious inspiration in the repetition of phrases, the scientific "truth" of which we should have to deny, but which nevertheless serve to arouse a sense of the reality of God. As we interpret the New Testament, we are coming to be accustomed to the presence of an eschatology which we believe to have been scientifically discredited. But we can at the same time see how admirably religious devotion was kept alive by a faith which took this eschatology literally.

The fact is, our theories in any realm are inevitably limited by our human experience, which we cannot transcend. Mr. John Burroughs in a recent article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, took up the cudgels in behalf of the intelligence of animals, which he felt had been grossly misjudged, because men have insisted on setting for animals problems which are humanly conditioned. Men endeavor to see whether the animal can develop the precise kind of intelligence which we possess. But if the tables were to be turned, we might be seriously embarrassed to meet the test which certain animals might bring to bear upon us. Suppose a hound should attempt to estimate our intelligence by discovering how accurately we could follow a trail by the sense of smell! We are absolutely unable to construct any detailed theory concerning this power of scent in dogs, because we have no experience which gives the clue to that kind of fruitful contact with reality. On the other hand, the dog is unable to use our particular kind of intelligence with any profit, because his experience is of a different kind.

Since, then, the ideas which we have and the theories which we construct are inevitably conditioned by our human experience, and since, moreover, the attempt so to construct theories that they shall embody a metaphysical transcending of our experience leads inevitably to abstractions, which may evoke high aspirations, indeed, but which are frequently not so serviceable for guidance of conduct as are less ambitious hypotheses, we are coming more and more to feel that surer guidance is to be found by critically analyzing and interpreting our experience, than by trying to transcend it. The service which ideas and theories may render is, as has been said, to picture for us the exigencies of our progress in life in so adequate a fashion that we may prepare for them, and turn them to our advantage.

Now if we sum up the total aspects of our experience, we find that we have to live in definite relationships to those aspects of our environment which are too vast and too full of mystery to have been adequately dealt with by the exact sciences. Science can conceivably explain the biological process by which a little child comes into existence; but the holy mystery of the mother's new-born love cannot be put into biological formulae. Yet it is

just as real as are the physical facts. The mother has to live in the presence of this great inner experience; and she must have words and theories in which to make definite her progress in the realm of mother-life. Art and poetry come to her rescue; religion lends its aid; and lo! we have the means of appreciating this precious experience, and of preparing men for an understanding of its significance.

Science can conceivably explain the biological processes which lead to death. But the soul of man, bereaved of precious companionship through remorseless physical force, is compelled to picture for himself the meaning of this dire event. Life, so rich and so full of significant activity, has passed into the unseen. It is just as legitimate and just as necessary to seek to formulate some theory concerning that unseen realm, as it is to speculate concerning the unseen properties of physical force. Thus arise doctrines of transmigration, of immortality, of resurrection. Every honest soul knows that the theory which he holds is conditioned by human ignorance. But although he may admit its metaphysical inadequacy, it serves to enrich his experience. Even a crude doctrine enables one actually to live in relation to this great mystery, and to draw from that relationship the enrichment of spiritual life which otherwise one would miss.

So, too, we must live in relation to that vast universal reality which includes all partial and lesser realities. It may be that the devotee of exact science will say that we have no tangible objective means of formulating any theory which will be of scientific value. But we cannot get rid of the *experience* of being set in an infinite environment, and of the joy which comes to the soul when it reaches beyond the immediate details of the world, and feels the presence of an infinite life, so real, so invigorating and so necessary to the satisfaction of our deepest aspirations. If this mystic experience is to enrich life, it, too, must receive some theoretical formulation. Thus men construct their doctrines of God, and through the guidance of these doctrines actually develop those traits of reverence, loyalty, and righteousness which are possible by living in the presence of God. Even if one's conception of God be crude, embodying impossible anthropomorphisms, even if we admit, as we admit in the case of our theories concerning life after

death, that the best thoughts we may have are scientifically inadequate, nevertheless, it is better to do the best we can than to give up the problem. The positive enrichment of life which comes from the determined attempt to picture a pathway of spiritual progress in this unseen realm is ample evidence of the importance of theorizing here as well as in the other realms of experience.

Now critical scholarship sees in the theological doctrines which have found their way into historical religion the means by which men, whose lives were conditioned by certain definite circumstances, pictured their relations to the vast unseen realm in which God is to be found. It is as true in religion as elsewhere that only those theories which actually prove themselves capable of ministering to the practical experience of men continue to live. Outgrown doctrines are, indeed, frequently retained in formal treatises and in liturgies because of ecclesiastical habits; but in order to retain a vital hold on the affections of men, a doctrine must have such a content that it can be actually used in working out the problems of religious living. We are all aware that some of the doctrines of historical orthodoxy have today a very slight hold on men, even though they still find a place in the authorized statements of theology. Those controversies which seemed so important to our forefathers, and on account of which they founded new sects and denominations, often seem to us to be matters of slight import. On the other hand, we are likely to put emphasis on some aspects of religion in which they evinced little interest.

A theology which follows the leading of the principles which have been expounded in these articles will clearly recognize this inevitable relation between human experience and efficient doctrine. It will apply in the construction of modern theology precisely the same tests as those which are used in the historical appreciation of past doctrines. If the reason for the strength of the biblical theology is to be found in the fact that it most directly and successfully symbolized in meaningful terms the fundamentals of a right relation to the unseen source of holiness and truth, the strength of any theology must depend on its regard for precisely this quality.

Now we today picture righteousness in different terms from those which characterized antiquity. Men of old believed in a

sovereign with divine rights, who should, by the exercise of his will, bring into existence the conditions which are essential to prosperity and righteousness. The free gifts of kingly favor were looked upon as the most potent sources of blessing. God, therefore, was pictured as a sovereign. The goal of his will was the "Kingdom" of God. The blessings of religion were represented as direct gifts from a personal sovereign. Justification and salvation were explained in terms of legal procedure before a kingly judge. Such a way of representing religious relationships was vital and real so long as men had a living experience of kings and potentates upon whom they were dependent for their welfare.

Today, however, we are entering in earnest into the great experiment of democracy. We have no kings to whom we can turn for special favors. Indeed, one who seeks such special favors today is liable to be accused of promoting "graft." Our highest goods cannot be given to us from a higher power. They must be worked out by us, as we intelligently co-operate with the latent resources of our environment. The best life is seen to be due to active co-operation with environing forces rather than to dependence on special favors. Consequently we are seeing a keen desire to express our relations to God in terms which seem more real and vital to us than do the symbols drawn from a monarchical régime. It is, for example, difficult today to arouse interest in that doctrine which used to be a cause of endless debate, viz., the question as to the limits of the sovereignty of God. On the other hand, the past century, which has witnessed the domestication of the conception of immanent activity expressed in democracy, has also developed a great emphasis on the conception of the immanence of God. The miracles, which in the older régime corresponded to the special acts of grace willed by a sovereign, have lost their importance as we have passed away from the older way of conceiving our relations to government, and as science has made us more and more aware of the universality of the immanent forces of the world in which we live. Theology today is inevitably reflecting this changed way of looking at moral and spiritual relationships; and theologians are making changes in emphasis and in content, in the endeavor to supply ways of picturing our relations with God which shall be more vitally effective.

A scientific theology will construct its doctrines, as has been said, by an accurate analysis of the experience of men in the present, and will seek to portray the life of righteous devotion to God in such a way as to make possible the control of all life by the realization of God. One great difficulty which confronts the revisions of theology is due to the fact that we have not yet developed adequate terms to give expression to our faith in the immanent God. The words and phrases which are used in our liturgies are taken from the days of kingly rights; and so fraught are they with religious associations, that we are rightly reluctant to give them up, even when we realize their inadequacy. It is probable that many of these terms will gradually acquire a new significance, while new terms will be discovered to supplement the inadequacy of the old. Thus we shall gradually develop a theology which shall be so real and so inspiring that men will gladly use it for the practical guidance of their spiritual life.

In emphasizing the fact of change, however, we should not forget that in the long centuries of experimentation, humanity has worked out some solutions which are of abiding value. In all realms of thought there are some theories which are so adequate that they need no serious revision. So we shall always find in the realm of doctrine certain fundamentals which are so true to universal experience that they cannot become antiquated. Thus while we recognize the differences between biblical formulations and those which seem adequate to us, it does not follow that these formulations lose all power to guide our lives. The prophets of Israel laid bare the moral aspects of religion in so truthful and searching a way, that any effective message of religious righteousness must ever find supreme inspiration in those marvelous seers of old. The Psalms represent the repeated working over of devotional literature in the actual service of worship, so that we have in them utterances which will always lift the heart to God. In the Book of Job we have an example of stubborn truthfulness which seemed like skepticism to the theological friends who sought to comfort the sufferer with "words of wind," but which will always bring a living message to turn men away from superficial formulae to a quest for the living God, even though that quest may lead

through the deep waters of doubt. In the fervent messages of the apostle Paul we feel a mysticism which lifted him above the barren wastes of the legalism in which he was educated, and which perpetually persuades men of the reality of communion with the indwelling divine Spirit. And in the words and the life of Jesus we have religious ideals put in such simple and convincing terms that we see how a life filled with the consciousness of God may be expressed in homely phrase, and in humble deed, so that the redeeming love of God may be made real.

Biblical criticism thus does not mean the retirement of the Bible as an abiding source of religious inspiration. The critical spirit really means that the same vital, experimental method of working out a living theology which characterized men of biblical times shall be allowed to operate freely today. The changes in content which are made by such a critical theology will mean the preservation of the spirit of the biblical literature. Just in so far as biblical doctrine actually serves to lead us into a deeper realization of the presence of God it will be retained. Just in so far as a modified doctrine is more efficient in promoting religious life, the modified doctrine will have the right of way. Jesus bade men judge any life or any movement by its fruits. This is the test which a critical theology welcomes. Its sole aim is to furnish to a given age the best spiritual guidance which is discoverable, whether that guidance originates in an ancient literature or in a modern experiment. But those who know best the character of the utterances of the Bible are certain that no experiments which the human race may make are likely to be of more value or of more abiding significance than are the wrestlings of those mighty spirits of old with the eternal problems of religion. The fundamental difference between the guidance which was sought by the older theology and that which is discovered by critical scholarship is this: The older theology took the doctrines of the Bible as authoritative formulae, and used them as rules by which to guide life. The critical theology studies the Bible to discover the way in which so triumphant a theology was developed, in order that we may worthily strive to work out in our day the best theology possible to us in the light of our total experience and knowledge.